In a recent book Goodacre observes that in the early days of scholarship on the Gospel of Thomas “the majority view was that Thomas knew the Synoptic Gospels. These days, essays on the state of the question tend to represent the debate as a scholarly split, half on the side of Thomas’s independence, half on the side of its dependence on the Synoptics.”¹ While this may be true quantitatively, the independence view, with its easy dismissal of dependence by means of an appeal to orality, has probably been more influential. Even though Goodacre argues that the Gospel of Thomas knew the synoptics, he avoids the word “dependence” because it associates “a text that is apparently so oral in nature” with “literary dependence” (sc. slavish derivation from the synoptics).² Instead, he suggests that the Gospel of Thomas accessed the synoptic materials through memory. “While it is not impossible” that the author had manuscripts on hand, “the logistical efforts involved in that enterprise are far greater than those involved with recalling texts from memory.”³ Goodacre thinks that his attempt to chart a via media might also explain what is happening in other “second-century texts that are familiar with but not necessarily dependent on the canonical Gospels.”⁴ Despite its many good points, this approach—just like the independence view with which it takes issue—underestimates the impact of literacy on the transmission of gospel tradition in the second and third centuries. The papyrological evidence often points to the physical consultation of manuscripts of the synoptic gospels or, at the very least, of synoptic or thematic compilations of the same. That adds up to dependence, albeit very creative dependence.

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¹ Goodacre (2012: 5).
⁴ Goodacre (2012: 7).
A  Fluidity in Transmission of the Canonical Gospels

How much fluidity was acceptable in the textual transmission of early gospels? The best way to answer this question, at least as far as what became canonical gospels are concerned, is to examine shared text (or areas of overlap). When all the areas of textual overlap between early canonical gospel papyri are compared, three kinds of changes are observable in the early gospel papyri: (1) minor detail changes that do not affect meaning; (2) interpretative changes that attempt to express more clearly the existing sense; and (3) interpretative changes that alter the existing meaning. Most type (1) and (2) changes were introduced by scribes with the intention of improving the Greek, style, or sense. They include small-scale omission and addition (often to eliminate repetition or redundancy), transposition involving a few words, harmonization to context or parallels, the use of “better” and/or normative Greek, substitution, and so on. Such limited fluidity, which we infer was acceptable in the early period, did not change the essential meaning of the canonical gospel text. While there was freedom to change minor details, type (3) changes are rare because scribes did not understand their task to involve redaction.5

B  The Authorial Framework of Non-Canonical Gospel Papyri

Therefore, when examining non-canonical gospel papyri we must start with the premise that fluidity in the canonical gospel textual tradition—the limited freedom that scribes assumed in transmitting the text and the interpretative next step that copying occasionally took—cannot explain the rise of non-canonical gospels in the second century. That is, the texts of the canonical gospels were by no means so fluid as to be transformed, short of redaction, into the Gospels of Thomas and Mary.6 Moreover, any changes effected as a

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5 See Chapter 5 of S.D. Charlesworth (forthcoming). In a number of studies B. Aland reaches the same conclusion using a different but in many ways similar method—early gospel papyri are compared with the hypothetical Ausgangstext (the text of the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 27th ed.). See B. Aland (1989: 55–70); (2002: 1–13); (2003: 19–38); (2006: 114–122). Aland’s approach has been developed by Min (2005) in a study of the early papyri of the Gospel of Matthew. For a fuller presentation of this essay and additional assessment of the early Greek papyri of the Gospel of Mary and (purportedly of) the Gospel of Peter see Chapter 6 of S.D. Charlesworth (forthcoming).

6 Cf. Schröter (2006: 116, 120–121) who argues that tradition was so malleable as to allow the reception and reframing of the Jesus tradition in non-canonical gospels.